



Part 11: Return of the Judah



Ezra



Background Notes

PURPOSE: To tell the story of the restoration of Judah under Ezra, the scribe, and Nehemiah, who helped rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem. The minor prophets (especially Zechariah) addressed God’s word to the exiles before and during this return to Judah, made possible by the decree of Persian King Cyrus.

AUTHOR: The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are attributed to the Chronicler (the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles). The Chronicler could be Ezra himself, or another Levite scribe.

DATE: Cyrus allows the return of the Judeans in 538 BC.

STYLE: The minor prophets repeat many of the themes of the major prophets, adding a few specific messianic details. The Chronicler takes the history of I and II Kings into the restoration, also incorporating the moral lesson to be learned from Israel’s and Judah’s turbulent history.



Opening Quotes

“These looked for their entries in the genealogical records, but were not found there, and so were excluded from the priesthood as unclean.” Ezra 2:62

“When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord...they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, ‘For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.’” Ezra 3:11

“If anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of the house of the perpetrator, who then shall be impaled on it. May the God who has established his name there overthrow any king or people that put forth a hand to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, make a decree.” Zech 12:10

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Look, your king is approaching, he is vindicated and victorious, humble, and riding on a donkey.” Zech 9:9

“I shall pour out a spirit of grace and prayer on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child.” Zech 12:10

“...they rebuilt the wall. The builders were armed, working with one hand and holding a spear in the other.” Neh 4:17

“Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength!” Neh 8:10

“We will no longer neglect the temple of our God.” Neh 10:39

the BIG PICTURE		LAW, History, Writings, Prophets		key covenants in our Father’s plan	
12 Periods	Plot	Other books related to period		stories in each period	
BC	THE BEGINNINGS	GN 1-11	Ps 8, 104	Creation, Adam & Eve, Cain & Abel, Noah’s ark, Tower of Babel	
1850	THE PATRIARCHS	GN 12-50		Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Israel), Joseph, Melchizedek	
1250	EXODUS FROM EGYPT	EX		Moses, the burning bush, the plagues, passover, exodus	
1200	JOURNEY TO CANAAN	NM, Jos	LV, DT	Sinai desert, 10 commandments, Levites, Law, Joshua	
1100	THE JUDGE CYCLE	Jg	Ruth	12 tribes, Gideon, Samson, Ruth, Samuel	
1030	KINGS & PROPHETS	1 & 2 S	1 Ch, Ps, Prov	Saul, David, Solomon, Jerusalem, the Temple	
1000	THE DIVIDED KINGDOM	1 Kg	Prov, Ecc, Songs	Israel (N), Judah (S), Elijah & Elisha, Isaiah, Assyrian exile	
721 587	BABYLONIAN EXILE	2 Kg	2 Ch, Tob, Hos, Am, Hab, Is, Jer, Lam, Jl, Mic, Zp, Jon, Nah, Ob, Ez, Dan, Bar	Babylonians, “major” prophets, Isaiah (to Israel), Jeremiah (to Jerusalem), Ezekiel (to the Exiles)	
538	THE RESTORATION	Ezr, Neh	Est, Judith, Hag, Zech, Mal, Job	Cyrus, 2nd temple, 2nd Law, “minor” prophets, new writings	
163 63	THE REPURIFICATION	1 Mac	Dn, 2Mac, Sirach, Wisdom	Greeks, Maccabean revolt, Hasmonean Dynasty, Romans, Jewish sects (Pharisees, Saducees, Zealots, Essenes)	
AD	JESUS CHRIST	LK	MT, MK, JN	Incarnation, Good News, New Law, Cross & Resurrection	
33 70	APOSTOLIC CHURCH	Acts	Rm, 1&2Co, Ga, Ep, Phil, Col, 1&2Th, 1&2 Tm, Ti, Phm, Hb, Ja, 1P, 2P, 1,2&3J, Jd, Rv	Pentecost, council, journeys, epistles, Body/Bride of Christ	



The Story of Part 11: Return of the Judah



As prophesied, Babylon was conquered by Persia, and King Cyrus issued a decree allowing the homeless Israelites and Judeans to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Those who decided to return were devastated to find their home in ruins. To make matters worse, tension arose between them and the Samaritans, a mix of Israelites and foreigners from the earlier Assyrian exile. These Samaritans were considered inferior to the Judeans because of their mixed breed. So when the Levites from Judah resumed their roles as priests, the Samaritans opposed the Judean restructuring of the temple, telling the Persian king Artaxerxes that these “Jews” (now a derogatory term) were a rebellious people who would stop paying taxes if their temple was rebuilt. The king forced a halt to the reconstruction of the temple. In response to this, God sent the prophets Haggai and **Zechariah** to urge the people to continue building. “Return to me, and I will return to you!” God spoke through Zechariah. The Persian King Darius then honored Cyrus’ decree, and the temple was rebuilt! The animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans resulted in a movement to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, headed by the king’s cupbearer, **Nehemiah**. With a hammer in one hand and a sword in the other, they rebuilt the walls!

Zechariah had experienced eight prophetic visions. In the first one, four horsemen were bringing Yahweh reports of peace in the world, a perfect time for rebuilding. In the second one, four smiths were throwing down four horns representing the nations which had conquered Israel and Judah. In the third one, there was an angel taking measurements in preparation for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. In the fourth one, the figure of Satan is introduced. Satan (“the accuser”) stood next to the high priest “Joshua” before Yahweh. God rebuked Satan, chose Jerusalem, and turned Joshua’s dirty robes into clean, glorious robes. A “branch” of David would be raised to remove the country’s guilt in one day. In the fifth vision, seven lamps on a stand represented Yahweh’s eyes, with an olive tree to the left and to the right representing the peaceful rule of Yahweh through the king and the high priest. The sixth vision was one of an immense, flying scroll overtaking all of the sinners in the land. In the seventh vision, a woman called “Wickedness” was contained in a barrel and put on an altar to be worshipped, symbolizing the false gods being worshipped. The eighth vision, like the first, had four chariots sent out to patrol the world.


After the eight visions given to Zechariah, Yahweh announced that he was coming back to Zion with the messages “Do not be afraid,” and “Love truth and peace.” A prophecy which followed described a future king of Israel, a humble king riding on a donkey. This kingdom would stretch far beyond the current borders of the promised land. In this kingdom, the frailest would become like King David. Strangely, this people would

one day mourn over “one they pierced.” A fountain would wash away all impurity, and Yahweh himself would become king of the world. And when this was to happen, there would no longer be the need for any prophets.

Along with the building of the new temple, the Levite scribe **Ezra** was appointed to administer the Law of Moses. With a spiritual resurgence of values came a growing concern to purify the race, and marriages with foreign women were dissolved. This was done in reaction to all the harm attributed to the original Israelites who had entered the promised land and intermarried with the foreign women despite God’s warnings. Along with the concern for racial purity came the utmost emphasis on keeping the Sabbath holy. Men were cast out if they were married to foreign women and punished if they were found working on the Sabbath. With the temple and the walls rebuilt, Ezra read publicly the Law of Moses amidst tears of sadness and joy, and it was declared, “We will no longer neglect the Temple of our God!”

We now come to the point in history where God’s people were in three locations: Egypt (Israelite and Judean exiles who had run from the Assyrians and Babylonians); Babylon (Judeans who stayed there); and Judah (Jews who returned under the Persians). In addition were the Samaritans and other scattered Israelites living in what used to be the northern kingdom of Israel. The story now focuses on the Judeans who faithfully returned to Jerusalem.

The book of **Jonah** is a story of a prophet who was told by God to preach to the sinners of the great city Nineveh. Out of fear Jonah tried to run away to the farthest city in the world but ended up swallowed by a fish and taken directly to Nineveh! After prophesying doom to the people there, the people changed their wicked ways, and so God spared them. Jonah complained to God that he felt like a fool. God explained to Jonah that he loved Nineveh and felt sorry for the people who didn’t know good from bad, and spared them since they repented.

In the last book of the Old Testament, the prophet **Malachi** (“messenger”) denounced the people for their impure sacrifices to Yahweh. What was worse is that they had divorced their rightful wives to marry foreign women, (and subsequently, the foreign gods). Calling the people back to God by offering tithes and heartfelt offerings with pure sacrifices, the prophet finally addressed the people’s question concerning the prosperity of the wicked: “Where is the god of fair judgment?” The answer he gave was that the difference between the upright and the wicked would one day be seen again, and that before this “Day of the Lord,” the messenger Elijah would be sent to prepare the people for their “purifier”. 



Defending the Faith: Sinning again and again

"How can I stop committing the same sin over and over again? I've tried praying, reading self-help books... I've tried everything, but I can't seem to stop committing this particular sin."

There are those who believe that there is no free will, and that every act we do is either determined by heredity and environment (atheism), or that free will was completely destroyed by original sin (Calvinism). If there is no free will, then there is nothing *we* could do to stop sinning. It would have to be done *for* us, and whether we wanted it or not! But assuming that we do have free will (which is defended elsewhere), we can do something about it. The catch is, we cannot do it *alone*.

While free will has not been destroyed by original sin, it certainly has been *wounded* by it. We feel the effect of this as "concupiscence," the *tendency* towards sin. Mary Beth Bonacci wrote an insightful article comparing concupiscence with other addictive tendencies. In a sense, we are all addicts. We want what feels good right now, regardless of any long-term effects. When these effects hit us, we try to avoid them by distracting ourselves with the same addiction, and the cycle continues. How can we break the cycle?

The answer comes in not relying on ourselves alone. This was the brilliant insight of Alcoholics Anonymous. *The addictive personality thrives in isolation.* Addicts not only prefer immediate pleasurable sensation, but they hide from relationships that compete for attention. In avoiding relationships, addicts cut themselves off from their own lifeblood, since God designed us as social creatures who thrive on such relationships.

In AA's 12-step program, the addict acknowledges *to the group* that he is an addict, that he is powerless over the addiction, and that he needs a Higher Power to help him break the cycle. The group loves and accepts him, and holds him accountable. Note the parallels. We go to our "group meeting," the Mass, and say – "I confess to Almighty God, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault," and we turn to our Higher Power, Jesus Christ, in our brokenness. We can just hear the prophets blasting us whenever we rattle off these words without paying attention to them! Notice that our "group" and our "Higher Power" are in a position to help us, since both hold us accountable, *and have shared our brokenness* (Zech 12:10, 1 Cor 12:22).

But even if we turn to God and to others for help without immediate results, we are not excused from fighting! Read all of Romans chapter 6, especially verses 17-18, and 2 Cor 12:7. Like it or not, there are some sins which our Father will allow us to be burdened with to the end, just to test our faith that he can and will save us, *provided we endure* (Mt 24:12-13, 1 Cor 10:12). In the meanwhile, have we really prayed enough? Have we bothered asking Christians who have learned how to avoid *this sin* to help us? Or have we decided which sins we can never conquer, instead of leaving that up to God? (1 Cor 10:13).



Expressing the Faith: City of God

A joyous song by Dan Schutte, inspired by Isaiah 9:60 and 1 Jn 1.

*Awake from your slumber,
Arise from your sleep!
A new day is dawning
for all those who weep.
The people in darkness
have seen a great light.
The Lord of our longing
has conquered the night.*

***Let us build the city of God.
May our tears be turned into dancing
For the Lord, our light and our love,
Has turned the night into day!***

*We are sons of the morning,
We are daughters of day.
The one who has loved us
has brightened our way.
The Lord of all kindness
has called us to be
A light for his people
to set their hearts free!
(Chorus)*

*O city of gladness,
now lift up your voice!
Proclaim the good tidings
that all may rejoice!
(Chorus)*

↗ **Next time: "Father God, Mother Zion"** ↖